

Delaware Dietetic Association

Public Comment on April 19 for the Council on Health Promotion and Disease Prevention

The Delaware Dietetic Association would like to applaud the intent of this Council and the work that has been accomplished thus far. As Registered Dietitians and Dietetic Technicians, Registered, throughout the State of Delaware, we are very excited about the positive health changes this initiative can potentially bring about in our state.

Our key messages for today include:

- 1) why the Delaware Dietetic Association feels committed to the goals of this project;
- 2) how dietitians uniquely view the current state of obesity and chronic disease; and
- 3) how prevention-centered nutritional interventions provided by RDs can contribute to health promotion and disease prevention.

The vision of the Delaware Dietetic Association is to optimize the health of Delawareans through food and nutrition, which fits hand-in-hand with many of the ultimate goals of this Council. Our network of more than 250 members has the unique capability of reaching the public, as well as physicians and other health care workers, with specific messages of nutritional approaches for disease prevention. We work in a variety of settings, including inpatient and outpatient clinical settings, school and workplace wellness centers, foodservice operations, industry, research, education, and private nutritional counseling. We deal with issues of general health and wellness, weight management, and nutritional management of chronic diseases such as diabetes, heart disease, renal disease, and numerous other conditions. We also frequently participate in health fairs and community wellness programs, as well as working with media resources throughout Delaware to circulate messages of good nutrition and health promotion.

All of us in this room are familiar with the frightening statistics surrounding obesity-related health issues and their associated costs—37% of adults in Delaware now classified as overweight, and 28% categorized as obese; 58,000 adult Delawareans with Type II diabetes... and the list goes on. And of course, as the work of the Council progresses, we hope to have even more specific information about the costs of these health issues to Delawareans. As Registered Dietitians, members of DDA are all too familiar with these statistics. We work with the faces behind these numbers every day, in hospitals, nursing homes, and outpatient clinics. Unfortunately, because our health care system has been focused for so long on “sick care” rather than “health and preventive care,” our expertise in the area of prevention is painfully under-utilized. Many of the patients we see might have been saved from countless hours of doctors’ office and hospital visits, thousands of dollars worth of treatments and medications—expenses both to the patients themselves and to their

health care providers and insurers—if preventive nutrition interventions had reached them earlier... before a lifetime of unhealthy nutrition habits had contributed to full progression of one or more chronic diseases. As an example, diabetes costs our health care system \$116 billion a year, and there are still an estimated 57 million Americans who are pre-diabetic and not receiving proper treatment or counseling, which could prevent their conditions from progressing to type II diabetes. Nationally, preventing the progression of pre-diabetes to type II diabetes could save billions of dollars every year. The same can be said for the treatment and prevention of many other chronic conditions, such heart disease and other obesity-related conditions.

RDs are uniquely trained to translate nutritional science into practical consumer and patient information to promote healthy lifestyles. We can teach parents to make good food choices for their young children, teaching healthy food habits that will last a lifetime. We can help consumers to understand food and menu labels and to apply that information to their individual nutrition and health needs. We can work with employers to develop nutritional aspects of workplace wellness programs, leading to healthier and more productive employees. And from a more clinical standpoint, we are trained to apply the evidence-based *Nutrition Care Process* as a key aspect of Medical Nutrition Therapy, including nutritional assessment, diagnostic, therapeutic, and counseling services for the purposes of disease management.

For these reasons, we also wish to assure adequate reimbursement for licensed dietitians/nutritionists in providing preventive nutrition care and Medical Nutrition Therapy services. Whether in school wellness centers, wt management counseling, or other settings in which RD's provide care, adequate coverage for patients—along the entire lifespan continuum from prenatal to end of life, is crucial. Unfortunately, nutrition services provided by Registered Dietitians are often not considered by insurers to be essential, even when an obesity-related condition is the primary dx. According to a recent survey of Registered Dietitians who have submitted reimbursement requests for MNT services—medical nutrition therapy—in the State of Delaware, 100% have had some degree of difficulty obtaining appropriate reimbursement, despite submitting the accurate reimbursement codes. In some cases, nutritional services are not considered billable at all. As an example, in one practice that deals primarily with bariatric patients, the Registered Dietitian provides vital pre- and post-surgical nutritional counseling to the patients... a requirement for bariatric surgery patients and a necessary component for their success in maintaining healthy nutritional habits and avoiding complications following surgery. However, the practice is unable to bill insurance for the RD's services due to coding limitations. In this case, the insurance companies bear the burden of the high cost of the surgical procedure, but not for the comparably inexpensive and relatively-low risk nutritional management that must accompany the surgery for it to be successful.

In summary, the Delaware Dietetic Association asks that Registered Dietitians be included as a voice in planning statewide health initiatives. We are interested in serving

as part of the strategy and solution, to increase awareness of PREVENTIVE health measures involving food and nutrition. As such, we are currently compiling information regarding the specific geographic availability of dietitians of varying specialties throughout the state, as well as health-related community programs in which we are participating, such as the Local Motion program, the Healthy Foods for Healthy Kids program, and other initiatives.

As our parent organization, the American Dietetic Association has stated: “Nutrition services, from pre-conception through end of life, are an essential component of comprehensive health care.” Further, “The vital and unique role that nutrition plays in improving and maintaining health should be explicit in health policy.”

Thank you.

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